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CHILD LABOR IN THE UNITED STATES.

—DISCUSSION.

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN: There are three quite distinct points of view from which to study this question of child labor. The first is in its effect on the child, and that may be settled at once by any ordinary, rational, well-educated person, even without waiting for the bureaus to gather more information. The advantage of a long period of immaturity is well known. Every higher race, in proportion to its development, has an ever-growing longer period of immaturity, for in that prolonged period comes the growth, the development that elevates the race. Therefore, whenever a child is set to work before he is mature, it limits the period of growth, and therefore steadily checks the development of the race. With that check in growth comes premature development. Children who are set to work reach this pretense of maturity—pathological maturity—earlier, marry earlier, have children earlier; and this constitutes a steady reduction in the value of the race. For that reason every child has a personal right to his full growth, that he may become^a a perfect citizen.

Next comes the family question with regard to the child. And here we are met by a host of ancient prejudices and misconceptions. Most people, and notably most women, assume that children are personal property—that the child is “my child.” And I have heard most estimable women defend child labor on the ground that the poor mother needed the money. Now, the poor mother might need meat, but that would not give her the

right to eat the child. The mother's need has no connection with the child. It is not right to set the children to providing bread for the family. It is as abnormal a proposition as it would be to see a hen eat her own chickens or eggs. The family has no claim upon the child comparable to the child's claim on the family.

But both those things can be laid aside absolutely, in connection with the very much larger question of the relation of the child to society. And this is what we have so fully overlooked in looking at it as a member of the family. The child is a citizen, from birth—just as much when it is so long (illustrating the length of an infant) as when it is six feet high. The child has social rights. Those rights are based on social utilities, as are all social rights; and practically the condition amounts to this: a physical human being will mature and be able to reproduce his kind at quite an early age. It takes longer to make a member of society. A boy may be a father or a girl may be a mother much earlier than either may become a doctor or a lawyer or even a good plumber. The physical maturity is one thing; the social maturity is quite another. As society advances, the child needs a longer and longer period of childhood in order that it may serve society better. Now, if society ignores this relation and leaves the child to the tender mercies of its parents, you have this constant replenishment of the lower classes with still lower types. The little children that are put to work cannot be put to the higher grades of work. You steadily increase the incompetent people instead of increasing the more competent people. Every child should be considered as a social asset, and we should endeavor to influence in that child all that is necessary to make him a valuable member of the community or to make her a valuable member of the community. This takes not only our ex-

tremely valuable system of education, but a much more extended care. Ask yourselves, any of you who have the peculiarity of a logical mind, why it is wise and right and useful and practical and commendable for the state to tax itself to furnish a child with an English education and not furnish the child with food or with clothes or with technical education or with employment. The relation of the state to the child is steadily enlarging. In most primitive conditions you find the child with nothing but parents, though even in the most primitive conditions the tribe initiates the child into the tribal life. That relation should grow, should increase as civilization increases. Against this stands the great body of prejudice, instinct, unreasoning conviction, the undeveloped motherhood of the world. We need among our women a recognition of their social responsibility to their children. That, I think, is what lies before us in this study of child labor. At the best that is an absolute injury to every child, no matter how good the profession, no matter how healthful and clean. If the child is to grow up to be a valuable citizen, it is a mistake for him to do work until he is so grown.

So there are three distinct points: (1) Every child has a personal right to his full growth. (2) The family has no property rights in the child. (3) The state should enlarge its services to the child until it has fulfilled its whole duty.

FRANCIS H. MCLEAN: The poor-widow argument is met everywhere by those striving for the abatement of child-labor. It is claimed that the necessary family readjustments following any forcing back into school of numbers of children engaged in gainful occupations mean that many families, especially those in which the heads are widows or deserted wives, will suffer long and continued

hardships. It cannot be too emphatically stated, however, that that argument is a mere bugaboo—a theory which so far has never been borne out by the facts. Individual cases of hardship there are, of course. But these cases are scattered and isolated, and can easily be looked after by any efficient philanthropic agency. In other words, economic conditions have not yet become so severe in the United States that any considerable portion of the population is compelled to depend for subsistence upon the earnings of children under fourteen years of age. Let me cite two most striking bits of history. At the time of the passage of the recent new child-labor law in Illinois, the state Federation of Women's Clubs met the poor-widow specter by promising to provide scholarships for all children forced back into school whose earnings were actually necessary for the support of families. It requested the state factory inspectors, school officials, charity organization societies, etc., to report all cases to them. After careful investigation it was found that the number of scholarships required was amazingly small in number. If I mistake not, not over twenty-five have been granted up to this time. Again, the Brooklyn Bureau of Charities has announced publicly again and again during the last year that it stood ready to provide similar scholarships for cases arising in Brooklyn where actual hardship was involved. The number granted to date is only ten. Of course, many cases of alleged hardship were investigated and found not to exist.

Now, what does this mean? Mrs. Gilman has told you that the interests of the child must be considered paramount to the interests of its parent or parents. I want to go one step farther and say that even the interests of the parent are often interfered with when child labor is permitted. That the readjustments in families in Chi-

cago, Brooklyn, and other places was accomplished with so little drain upon philanthropic resources indicates plainly (1) that the earnings of some children were not at all necessary for the support of their families, and (2) that the working of others meant only that the parent or parents or other members of the family were not doing all they should and could do. In other words, there was reserve force in many families which was only called out when the easy method of supplementing incomes by having the children work was taken away.

Pursuing our search farther, we are just beginning to realize how many factors are responsible for the existence of child labor, besides purely economic ones. We said a few moments ago that in many cases the earnings of the children were not even apparently required for the sustenance of families. Why, then, were the children at work? Just now there are several investigations being carried on along the same line in New York City, which will throw much light on this question. Inquiry is being made as to just why children apply for their working papers and leave school when they have reached the minimum age and scholarship required by law. Why do they leave then instead of going on through the rest of the grammar-school course at least, as do many of their fellow-pupils? It is not possible to give the probable results of these investigations at the present time. I do know, however, that already many causes bulk largely in the returns, and that economic reasons are not of primary importance. Let us examine some of these other causes:

1. Transplanted Old World ideals. To the Italian, for instance, the boy of twelve is ripe for work. The father may remember that he himself started at that age—why should not his child? He forgets that, while he went to work on the farm or truck garden, his son must go into

a factory and must fight many deadly and invisible enemies.

2. Lack of proper facilities for manual training in the public schools. By careful inquiry it has become apparent that in many instances both parents and children would have welcomed more schooling if there had been an infusion of practical training of the hands. The instinct, the craving, to make objective things is with many a child, boys particularly. If it is not satisfied in school, he will seek it in the workshop. The responsibility for many a prematurely aged child rests upon this great lack of our public-school system.

3. Closely connected with this is the lack of social and recreational opportunities for many of the children—a lack which they see is partly obviated among young people who go to work and have at least a part of their income for themselves. It is not a far-fetched consideration—the presence or absence of playgrounds and gymnasias, and breathing-spaces for the development of the child's normal play-life as a factor in child labor. Anything which broadens child-life in our crowded neighborhoods will inevitably reduce that restlessness which so easily leads to a desire for the excitements of earning one's own money. The work of a child, say between fourteen and sixteen, may often embody in it much undeveloped play-instinct.

4. There are other instances in which lack of parental control is responsible for children starting to work. Children having fair recreational opportunities go to work because they are the real rulers of the household, and sudden whims and caprices induce them to give up school.

5. Backward and stupid children, ashamed because obliged to be in classes composed mostly of children younger than themselves, quite naturally seek to escape

from school as soon as possible. They can be kept only by the system of ungraded classes with personal instruction.

These, then, are some of the causes of early child labor. It will be seen that they do not arise from economic considerations on the part of the families involved. On the contrary, if the investigations now being conducted in New York City are verified by investigations made in other places, we shall have very strong arguments for agitating for an increase of the minimum age limit to fifteen or even sixteen years.

Even then, however, we shall not protect childhood in some ways as well as it is protected in France. Of course, France, unfortunately, has a low minimum age limit of thirteen years. In time this will be rectified. On the other hand, however, France protects its children, both male and female, up to the age of eighteen, besides all women. By a series of administrative decrees it bars the employment of youths, sometimes up to the age of sixteen, some times up to the age of eighteen, in hundreds of important industries on the ground that they are unhealthful. Not only are dangerous occupations interdicted, but employment in workshops where noxious gases or vapors or injurious dust are present. Sometimes the removal of these by efficient systems of ventilation makes the employment of children possible; more often not even this loophole is left. Of course, there are general prohibitions in American child-labor legislation and administration of this same sort, but as a rule the interdicted occupations are those which are considered to be actually and menacingly and obviously dangerous. There is no such careful and painstaking exclusion of the child from occupations which may insidiously undermine health through the inhalation of foreign substances not imme-

diately dangerous. I have not time now to read over some of the present French prohibitions, but I can say that the number of important industries covered is very large indeed.

Why is there this difference between American and French standards? Why is it that France, with a low minimum age limit, guards its youth up to the age of eighteen, while the model states in America have a higher age limit, but offer practically no protection to the child when legally put to work? The answer is, I think, that France has more consistently viewed the dangers of child labor from the physical standpoint, than we have. We have always taken the physical standpoint as our starting-point, but have sometimes hurried on to moral and intellectual considerations, and have perhaps not given enough time to the primary dangers. Never for a moment have French legislators and administrators forgotten that health was first involved; never have they forgotten that a boy of sixteen was still a boy and not a man; never have they been betrayed into the absurdity of presuming him to be in all respects mature—the kind of absurdity which Mrs. Gilman has so vividly gridironed. When we have hammered up our minimum age limit here in America, it behooves us to enter the path which France and other countries have blazed for us, in protecting our younger workers from those invisible enemies of the human body against which even the mature workers have to battle hard.